

# VOICE ON THE WIRE

*the operator/telephone culture digest*



Welcome to the second issue of *\*voice on the wire\** the Telephone Operator/culture digest. I hope this issue finds all you Operators out there happy and healthy. My name is JUDITH BEEMAN and I've been with BC Tel for 11 years. This is a very good thing...

What's not to love about being an opr?! The hours are great (I am *not* a morning person); I talk to and assist people without face to face contact (less germs); the chairs are comfy and our work positions modern; I dress casually; get to speak with those charming male operators in the UK once in awhile and—now this is crucial—the work leaves me plenty of time for other hobbies and interests. Being an operator is quirky and perhaps a dying breed...I truly enjoy my work and hope it'll last for years to come.

This issue of *\*votw\** includes the following:

- \* Lily Tomlin aka Ernestine the Telephone Queen
- \* AT&T vs MCI
- \* My award winning poetry (!)
- \* A telephone comic by Roberta Gregory
- \* Working the phones for a financial institute
- \* They Might Be Giants Dial-A-Song line
- \* Telephone pranks, trivia and manners

DAVID MASSEY gives *\*votw\** a wonderful plug on his website <[www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/5997/votw.html](http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/5997/votw.html)> Make sure you stick around and check out all the telephony to be found on David's site. Please send photocopies of telephone clippings and stories to *\*votw\**. Additional copies of *\*votw\** are \$1.50 ppd each (specify which issue).

this issue of *\*votw\** is dedicated to the unknown artist who drew the cover image

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the fine print: Entire contents of *\*votw\** are the product of its contributors, some of whom work at telephone co's, such as BC Tel. Said telephone co's are in no way responsible or to blame for any material found within these pages. Video killed the radio star.



LILY TOMLIN's comedic creation, ERNESTINE, is the nosy, abusive and downright rude Telephone Operator we love to hate. Ernestine made her debut on Rowan and Martin's Laugh In television program on December 29, 1969 and this literally catapulted Lily to stardom...mega recognition at the very least. In 1971 Lily's *This is a Recording* album was released; the album was recorded during a live show in Pasadena, California. 99% of the material on *This is a Recording* is telephone related and very funny. Ernestine only shows up once on this lp, the rest of the show features a "Miss. Tomlin" as the telephone operator from Hell.

Sketches on *This is a Recording* include giving tips to the owner of a Bordello on how to use her phone ("We notice this phone is only receiving incoming calls..."); flirting with Vito the repairman (and making sure his clients offer the man a beer); cutting in on the line of a bigwig at Pepsi-Cola to get a dime refunded and bullying Mr. Veedle ("Oh no, no, Mr. Veedle we prefer the word "vicious threat" to blackmail"). The back cover of the album delivers a very foxy (to use the vernacular of the time) photo of Lily (*\*votw\** reproduces this in the center of this publication!).

Have I reached  
the party to  
whom I am  
speaking?  
(SNORT)





*One goal of \*votw\* is to provide the public with a glimpse into the glittery world of telephone communications. Believe it or not, that world includes so much more than the "zero" and "411" operator. This issue of \*votw\* takes a glimpse at what work is like for bank employee, W. SEAN ELIUK, who works on the phone here in Vancouver.*

Ahhhh, the financial institute. That ever-present factor in everyone's life. We all use one. Be it a trust, credit union or bank, they are located on every major street or shopping mall. It just so happens that I am employed by one of the major financial institutes in Canada. Even better, I work in a call center for that same bank.

Now my own job is a bit different from say a telephone operator. I have the task (and I do me in TASK!) of helping customers with their financial queries. To be exact, I work in the Visa department of the bank. I can be the lifesaver or the complete, rude, ungiving bastard (yes I've actually been called that).

\*Votw\* inquired about my job. I personally receive anywhere from 50 to 100 calls a day. This bank has three call centers in Canada, ours in Vancouver, being the largest. In our office there are approximately 180 employees. The center can receive over 5000 calls per day. These calls can come from all over Canada, the U.S.A. and even the rest of the world. We are the major department with various other departments working along side.

The basic job entails greeting, verification to make sure we are speaking to the actual cardholder, then solving the problem. There can be, what seems to be, a never ending list of problems. The easier situations involve address changes, credit limit or balance inquiries, checking on charges etc. On the other hand the difficult inquires could be misunderstanding surrounding interest or any other financial charges, people wanting to stop charges from coming onto an account, missing or misapplied payments, dealing with Internet services or any other phone orders, general complaints regarding the bank and their services, and much more. We each sit at a desk in a pod of four. My pod pals and I all get along great, and occasionally socialize outside of work. We are always supportive of each other, and lend an ear after a truly bad call.

People want to know about the obscene calls we receive, and I hate to disappoint but I have never received any. I could not imagine someone waiting on the phone for 15 min to be obscene. A waste of time. However one call that sticks in my mind would have to be this little old lady who thought we were the Maytag repair service. She was quite upset about her washing machine and wanted repairs done, but nobody was helping her. She was hysterical. We tried to explain the situation and who she had actually reached but she hung up. I guess the machine never got fixed.

You do need to have a thick skin when doing this job. People often swear at you, yell, scream, or are just plain rude. Don't take it personally.

Call centers seem to be the new field of employment these days. You can take a call center class at some colleges, or go to a private school specializing in training. This job is here to stay. It is basically employment which allows me the opportunity to have some more spare time in your life. Do I like my work? For the most part I'd have to say yes. It fits nicely into my life. And that's what I want a job to do.

*Waaaaay back in 1988 my office held a Valentines Day poetry writing contest. I entered, and was one of the three winners – I received a huge Toberlone chocolate bar for my effort. I decided to do a twist on the usual romance of the day and wrote with a real-life person in mind, this guy from 'back east' who used to call in and...oh, well, read for yourself. A semi-true tale:*

### Directory Assistance – 11:32 am

There I sit, alert at my position  
It's an out of province call  
I answer, I wait, I listen

A man on the line – Toronto accent I detect  
I gasp, I hold my breath

He asks for the Canucks office  
then I wait, so patiently for his inquiry to begin  
I smile, I grin, It's him!

Do I like sports?  
To wrestle or more  
perhaps with my boyfriend, upon the floor?

The questions are sly, I've heard them before  
He doesn't recognize my voice – the bore!  
I realize this time with a sickly feeling in my tummy  
to him, oh yes him, I'm just another operator dummy

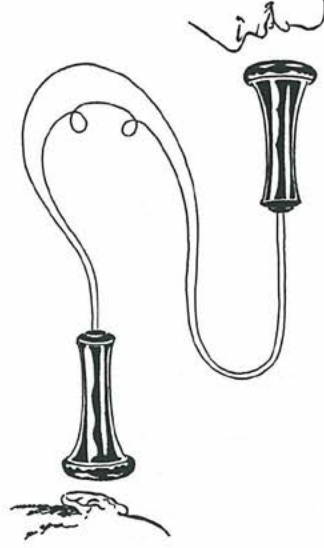
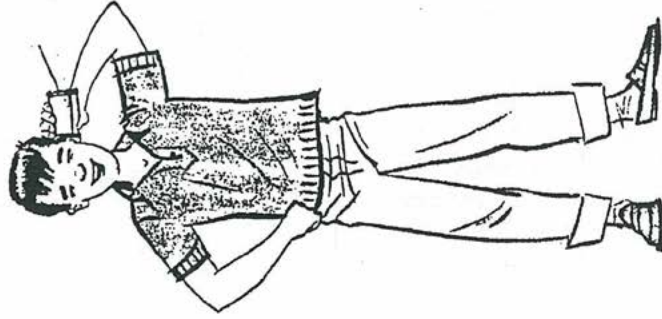
*Flash forward to October 1997—Halloween—and my office had a pumpkin face drawing contest. I entered the very scary ALICE COOPER face here and won...nothing! Note the spelling Judith Booman. The essential Alice albums are Killer, Love it to Death and, Welcome to my Nightmare.*





## THINGS A BOY CAN DO WITH ELECTRICITY

You can telephone for a short distance without batteries if you connect two telephone receivers together, using each one as both a transmitter and receiver. When speaking, it will be necessary to shout in order to be heard in the receiver



## TELEPHONING WITHOUT BATTERIES

Connect two telephone receivers together and use each one both as a transmitter and a receiver. It will be necessary to shout but the system will actually operate and give you an idea of what telephoning was like with one of the early Bell phones.

at the other end. When a telephone receiver is used as a transmitter, by speaking into it, the sound waves of the voice strike against the diaphragm and make it vibrate. The moving diaphragm and the magnets are for the moment a tiny dynamo and they generate a feeble current of electricity. This current of electricity travels along the wires to the other receiver and moves its diaphragm. The second telephone receiver is for the moment an electric motor.



## Last elevator operator bids adieu to 'cage'

By Janet Smith

B.C.'s last elevator operator folded her cage shut and hung up her brocade uniform for the last time on Friday.

Shiera Frankel was the final worker in a 75-year-long line who manned an ornate, copper and brass elevator in the historical building at 825 Granville.

"That elevator was a beautiful piece of the past," says Frankel, who led the building's diverse mix of lawyers, jewelers and Terminal City newspaper workers up and down the building's six storeys. "It was a temporary, surreal job to do for awhile."

The elevator will be remodelled into an automatic lift with as much of its caging and metal ornamentation left intact as possible. Property owners Dorset Realty Ltd. had attempted to save their unique, manual elevator—a lasting testament to the glory days of Granville Street. But B.C. Hydro pulled the plug on the DC power the lift needed to run. One of the owners, Ron Schuss, says the necessary converter would probably have cost \$10,000 to \$25,000. Complicating the problem was the fact that the working parts up in the



Shiera Frankel was the last in a 75-year-long line to operate the lift at 825 Granville. roof were on their last legs.

The final blow, though, was that the provincial elevator inspector insisted the lift be modernized to '90s safety standards. Among the changes he's required are removal of the glass outer casing of the elevator and replacement with metal doors.

In honor of its history, Dorset invited elevator operators from years past to gather and reminisce at the closing ceremony Friday evening. Frankel shared stories with them, including two women who were in their 80s.

Frankel's favorite part of the job was meeting people. With an old, black dial phone in the elevator with her, she could keep in touch with the outside

world and work on other pursuits when lift traffic was slow.

"I had a lot going on in that cage," says Frankel, who was also one of the founders of Granville Beach films projected on the wall from the property nearby. "I got the outdoor cinema going from that elevator. I finished my degree on that elevator."

In her three years of work, Frankel never met with any serious mechanical problems. "People always ask if we got caught between floors, and I say, 'Never unwillingly,'" laughs Frankel.

Frankel is now planning a trip to Israel and Egypt this summer. As for the employees in the building, "They'll miss out on the personal touch," Frankel says.

## Making Calls

1 Lift the handset.

2



Dial the telephone number.

3



Speak to the other party.

4

Hang up when finished.



Cellophane! Vinyl! Nylon! It's all plastic products and all discussed in STEPHEN FENICHELL's 1996 Harper Collins book *PLASTIC: the making of a synthetic century*. Also only a few phone references including this one here...



In 1927, Bell Telephone offered \$1,000 to each of ten designers recommended by a panel of artists to produce designs for a new phone that would combine the speaker and microphone in a single handset. The company's in-house engineers had created an awkwardly functional updated version of the old candlestick model. The one design specification for the new phone was that it be molded from "rugged, durable, phenolic resin." Which meant Bakelite.

Henry Dreyfuss, son of a family of theatrical designers and one of the leading movers and shapers of industrial design, was one of the candidates approached by Bell on the first round. But Dreyfuss turned Bell down on the grounds that the project demanded a top-to-bottom redesign, a goal that could be accomplished only in close consultation with Bell's own engineers.

After rejecting Dreyfuss's proposal outright, once the contest designs were all in and all deemed unsuitable, a chastened Bell reapproached Dreyfuss, now willing to pay what it took to let him do what he had initially proposed: to fully integrate the phone's new form with its function, from the bottom up. Dreyfuss, for his part, would describe his commission a trifle more archly: "They wanted a little art to wrap the phone in." Dreyfuss's basic black Bakelite rotary-dial receiver (modified 1950) was to define "phone" for decades to come, until the advent of the digital era.

HENRY DREYFUSS (1904 - 1972) was known (affectionately) as "the man in the brown suit." He developed other phone models, including the first slim model, the Trimline, in 1963. He designed airline seating, forklifts, camera's (no less than the first inexpensive Polaroid, the Swinger) and a train for the New York Central line which was referred to as the "Magic Carpet." Alfred Hitchcock utilized Henry's train and other examples of his workmanship in his films.

The Smithsonian Institute held an exhibition marking Dreyfuss' work in 1997. Check out the website: <http://www.si.edu/ndm/exhib/hd/>

NAUGHTY STUFF dept.: I can just picture the raised eyebrows around the office over this one! Could a Telephone Operator really be endorsing PRANK CALLS? I don't like prank calls that are vindictive or hurtful (I especially abhor calls that make fun of people with vocal afflictions) and I personally haven't made a prank call since I was a pre-teen (I got a woman to see if her "refrigerator was running"). I have, however been popping over to this astonishingly entertaining website <<http://www.frankworld.com/pranks/>> and having more fun than I probably should admit too. *The Art of the Prank Call* consists of a few dozen real-audio pranks which download in moments plus links to other prank pages and "troupe" of prank call aficionados. Items such as "Burger King Popcorn" and "Flaming Chiropractic" are a hoot, while those musically inclined can check out the medley "I'm Gettin' A Little Peeved Here" which runs for over six minutes.

Well, now \*votv\* has seen just about everything! This article comes from that fine national publication *People Weekly* (25/11/96 edition)

You don't know. You don't care. It doesn't matter. Whatever. If you're in TEXAS and about to make a long-distance call from a pay phone, that kind of indifference won't get you very far—at least not so far as AT&T, MCI or Sprint. What it will get you depending on how you answer the operator who asks your choice of long-distance carrier, is either the I Don't Know telephone company or one of its corporate siblings: I Don't Care, It Doesn't Matter or, yes, Whatever.

The four telecoms are the brainchild of DENNIS DEES of Kennedale, a suburb of Fort Worth, and they're all part of KINT—yes it does sound sort of like AT&T doesn't it?—which he founded in September 1995. Research, says Dees, 38, shows that 97 percent of those who place long-distance calls through operators do name a carrier. That leaves 3 percent, a market chunk he estimates to be worth \$15 million a year to an enterprising businessman, like, say, himself. "Of those 3 percent," he says, "some of them will say, 'I don't care,' some will say, 'I don't know' or 'It doesn't matter.' We tried to cover our bases."

Although the big carriers seem vaguely horrified by Dees's play—"Customers might as well say, 'I don't care how much I pay' or 'I don't care what kind of service I get,'" snorts Sprint spokesman Larry McDonnell—his creative nomenclature doesn't break any laws. "We're not charging the highest rates we could," says Dees. (But not the lowest either. A three-minute, operator-assisted call between Houston and Dallas costs \$4.63 with AT&T; \$7.64 with I Don't Care.)

Buoyed by the possibility that the 3 percent market share might be more than just a Texas phenomenon, Dees is thinking of taking his companies national. "I'm the first to admit our names are a little strange," he says. "But I don't apologize for it."

Whatever.



Ever hear of TELEPHONE NURSING? It's been going on for years and is recognized in the Nursing profession as a valid part of healthcare. Kath Webster runs a website devoted to her profession as a TN <<http://www.katsden.com/teleurse/>>. Telephone Nurses diagnose medical conditions over the phone and give advice (less limited than you would think). Kath's page has a link to the TN monthly journal which has some great articles, of interest even to those who aren't in the profession (there's a super write-up dealing with culture and the telephone). The best part of Kath's webpage is the "ergonomics" section with links to over 20 sites making suggestions and comments to those of us who spend our days typing at a computer. Want to avoid carpal tunnel syndrome and bad posture trap? It's all here. And I don't mind saying I feel comforted by the fact this information was put together by a Nurse.

# LILY TOMLIN

## This is a Recording

### SIDE ONE

1. ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL 2:42
2. MR. VEEDLE 3:30
3. THE MARRIAGE COUNSELOR 2:37
4. JOAN CRAWFORD 3:27
5. OBSCENE PHONE CALL :59
6. THE REPAIRMAN 3:29
7. THE BORDELLO 3:04
8. STRIKE 4:10
9. PEEVED :40

### SIDE TWO

1. ERNESTINE 1:44
2. THE PAGEANT 2:36
3. THE F.B.I. 3:07
4. THE MAFIA AND THE POPE 3:00
5. MRS. MITCHELL 4:39
6. AWARDS DINNER 3:56
7. BOSWICK 9 2:27
8. I.B.M. :55

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POLYDOR INCORPORATED 1720 BROADWAY, N.Y.





Entertainment Weekly magazine compiled a fine collection of 50 all-time best television commercials—number 20 and 21 feature telephone action.



**AT&T**

**"JOEY CALLED"**

AT&T REACHED out and touched us with this vignette of an aging mother moved to tears by her grown son calling "just 'cuz I love you." Back then, "long distance meant bad news," says N.W. Ayer's Tricia Kenney. "We wanted to overcome that." She also cops to a more hard-nosed motive: "We were preparing for divestiture. AT&T was a monopoly, but there was competition on the rise." As in... MCI? AGENCY: N.W. Ayer & Partners YEAR: 1981



**MCI**

**"PARENTS"**

MCI's SHREWD parody of "Joey Called"—an elderly mother sobs not over her son's affection but at her phone bill—was funny and aggressive. "At that time, AT&T had 98 percent of the market," says copywriter Tom Messner, "so we attacked it.... We'd tell the salespeople when the ad was going to run, so they'd be ready. Once calls [to switch to MCI lessened], we took it off the air." But not before winning a Clio. AGENCY: Ally & Gargano YEAR: 1982

TELEPHONE GREETINGS AROUND THE WORLD

Country	Greeting
France.....	"Allo" (Hello)
Germany.....	"Hallo" (Hello)
Greece.....	"Embrós" (Go ahead)
India.....	"Hanji" (Greetings)
Iran.....	"Balch" (Yes)
Israel.....	"Shalom" (Peace)
Italy.....	"Pronto" (Ready)
Japan.....	"Moshi-moshi" (Hello)
Mexico.....	"Bueno" (Good day)
Portugal.....	"Está lá?" (Are you there?)
Saudi Arabia.....	"Na' am" (Yes)
Spain.....	"Quien habla?" (Who is speaking?)
Turkey.....	"Allo" (Hello)

## Long-distance shocker: BELL INVENTED PHONE SO HE COULD TALK TO THE DEAD!

INVENTOR Alexander Graham Bell wanted his first phone call to be long distance—he hoped he could reach all the way to the spirit world and contact the dead!

Bell was a creative genius who developed the phone in 1876 in a bizarre bid to speak to his dead brother, reveals Dr. Ayital Ronell, author of *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia And Electric Speech* (University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

"Bell was not a scientist," Ronell explains. "He was considered a poet, a kind of madman. His original idea was to supply a hearing device for both his mother and his wife, who were deaf."

"But he finally went about inventing the telephone when his brother, with whom he was very close, died. He wanted to regain contact by ringing him up electronically."

Things started to fall into place

**Creative genius wanted to ring up his brother in the afterlife**

when Bell teamed up with engineer Thomas Watson, a spiritualist who desperately wanted a connection to the afterlife.

"He believed in ghosts and held daily seances," Ronell says. "Bell showed up at Watson's workbench one day and told him of this crazy idea he had."

"Everyone else had laughed at him, but Watson was losing his touch as a medium, so he felt this might be a more reliable way to contact ghosts."

"Watson was the one with the technical know-how. Bell merely had this vision that you could speak to people over a long distance."

Perhaps no one has been able to phone the spirit world yet, but they keep trying. "Some people are buried with phones that actually work," Ronell says. "The telephone still has an eerie quality."

—JOHN HARRIS



Bell's demonstration of the telephone was a ringing success with his peers

## OOPS! Suicide callers get a real 'hotline'—it's X-rated

Callers to a suicide prevention hotline nearly dropped dead when it turned out to be a sex line!

By dialing the number in northeastern Pennsylvania, callers were connected to a business that takes credit card orders to arrange intimate encounters.

The mixup was caused by a printing error in the Bell Atlantic telephone directory for the Lehigh area. The phone company said it would fix the mistake in its 1998 phone book. Meanwhile, it has no idea whether calling the sex line stopped any suicides.



## Escape from the cell

A subconscious desire to escape the constant monitoring by bosses and wives is causing Japanese office workers to lose their mobile phones in large numbers, *Shukan Hoseki* magazine reports.

In 1996, a grand total of 23,428 phones piled up at Tokyo Metropolitan Police's lost and found centre—64 a day, abandoned mainly on commuter trains.

"They should all just swap phones, and then they would have the stress-relieving pleasure of telling the caller that they don't know what they are talking about," commented a former Tokyo office worker.



## HOW TO USE THE TELEPHONE



Be sure of the number before calling. Use the directory.



Allow the person you are calling enough time to answer.



Answer promptly. You may miss an important message.



Identify yourself by name or business firm—not just "Hello."



Speak into the mouthpiece. Lips should be 1/2 inch away.



Don't shout. The telephone was made for normal speech.



Take messages for absent persons.



Hang up gently. Slamming the receiver is discourteous.

Yellow Pages serves up poolside entertainment for young Olson siblings

## Fun phoney performance a thing of the past

geoff olson

*"My copy of the Los Angeles Yellow Pages I stole from the Beverly Hilton Hotel three years ago. It has been a fund of extraordinary material, as surreal as in its way as Dali's biography."*  
—J.G. Ballard

If a city can be said to have a personality, then the telephone business directory constitutes its psychological profile. The book is a readout of the consumer mind-set and a precise gauge of subterranean civic desires (number of pages for escort services in the Vancouver Yellow Pages: 30). But it isn't just a field guide to the urban ID—it's also a source of unintentional humour, like interoffice memos or local newscasts.

Recently, a relative reminded me of an afternoon of improvisational performance some years ago—the only props being a telephone and the Vancouver Yellow Pages. My sister and I were idling away a summer afternoon by the parental pool, and I suggested we make phoney phone calls. Out came the Yellow

Pages, and a search commenced for businesses with the most comical possibilities.

We started by placing a call to Humpty's Surgical Corsets ("We Put Humpty Together Again"). "This is Mr. Dumpty," I said, affecting a gravely sombre tone. "I have a problem with a corset I purchased." A chipper young woman, sounding genuinely concerned with my plight, counselled me to continue. "I have fallen off the wall once again. All the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put me back together again. The corset is completely useless." The woman informed me the manager would be in later in the afternoon, and asked again for my name. "Dumpty," I replied. "D. U. M. P. T. Y. I will call again later."

On to the next call. Maple Leaf Self Storage sounded interesting, and I let my fingers do the walking. "I would like to store myself," I said in an accent, describing myself as a new arrival to North Delta. "I also have 14 aunts, 13 cousins and five nephews. I would like to store them, too." The fellow at the other end informed me helpfully that Maple Leaf stores possessions, not selves.

Next, I made a far-flung call to a Crazy Mike's Video in the Fraser Valley, identify-



ing myself as a field worker with the Department of Hurt Feelings. I told the manager I had personally received complaints from patrons bothered by the name of the business. "Crazy" is an offensive term to those with mental or emotional difficulties," I said officially. I then proposed acceptable names for the franchise: Psychologically Troubled Mike's, Manic Depressive Mike's, Bipolar Mike's. I remember him hanging up, yelling "You people really are something else!"

My sister, on the other line, was having a

hard time suppressing laughter, as was I. The secret to phoney phone calls is to do them straight and to stay in character. I was surprised how literal-minded the listeners were. As soon as I said "Mr. Dumpty," or "Manic Depressive Mike's" I figured the jig was up, but no.

We made a few more calls, including one to the local office of the Church of Scientology. I identified myself as a Theutan, a 2,000-year-old soul. Scientologists believe whizzes around in space before adopting corporeal existence. I told the woman I was out in orbit and looking for a good body: male, blonde, something around six feet tall. The Scientology woman responded in a fit of laughter, which I took as a pretty healthy response from a supposed brainwash victim. "Oops, I gotta go," I said, "a meteor's comin'!"

Goofball behaviour, I know, but motivated by not much more than an impulse to have fun. But this was back in the balmy days of pre-surveillance, a decade before call display and star 69. Today's climate of institutionalized suspicion—a cold war of I and thou—isn't conducive to phoney phone calls. Telephone fraud isn't what it used to be.

<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Gallery/3452/>

Here's the funniest article in this issue of \*votw\* ...what a scream! Thanks to Geoff Olson for permission to reprint. Originally read in the Vancouver Courier (8 March 1998). Check Geoff's website for more examples of his writing: [www.geocities.com/SoHo/Gallery/3452/](http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Gallery/3452/)





*Focus now, gentle reader, as \*votw\* friend STEWART MASON guides you into a realm of many possibilities, a land of two giants, both named John!*

In 1983, two nice boys from the upper-class Boston suburb of Lincoln, Massachusetts, JOHN FLANSBURGH and JOHN LINNELL, had a novel promotional idea for their struggling avant-pop duo THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS. Temporarily unable to perform live because Linnell had broken his wrist and most of their equipment had been stolen in a burglary, the duo hooked up a cheap answering machine in Flansburgh's Brooklyn apartment and started their Dial-A-Song service, still in service today (718) 387- 6962.

In the liner notes to their 2-CD retrospective THEN: THE EARLIER YEARS (Restless, 1997), Linnell and Flansburgh explain the gimmick's unforeseen benefits: "The process of making recordings for Dial-A-Song proved to be valuable training in songwriting economy and craft. Almost nothing sounded good on it except clear voices and simple instrumentation...The harshest songwriting lesson we learned about our new-found phone audience came almost the minute we hooked up the machine: if the caller didn't like it, they hung up."

Of course, not everyone hung up, and Dial-A-Song quickly became a daily fix for many New Yorkers. My friend Deb Albericci says that in the office she worked in in the mid-80s, it was an afternoon ritual for everyone to gather around someone's speakerphone and listen to that day's song. (Yes, the song does change more or less daily!) In the early days, people could leave messages after the song was over—it was, after all, also Flansburgh's home phone number—and occasionally, these messages made their way into songs. "I'll Sink Manhattan" (like all the songs mentioned here, available on THEN) opens with a backwards message which translates into "John and John, we love you, from the NYPD," left by a uniformed fan. "I'm Def" contains a loop of an unidentified voice beseeching "We have our own song and we wanna get it recorded."

But probably the best, certainly the weirdest, message ever left on the machine was an accident. Having found the Dial-A-Song number through a classified ad in the Village Voice, a woman named Gloria played the day's song for her two unidentified male companions over the speakerphone, and their bewildered conversation about "There May Be Giants" and the impossibility of making money from such a service (with a priceless digression about "intellectuals talking to other intellectuals in a foreign language at La Maiz...La Mais-ee-on-ette") was captured by the answering machine and released by the band. I tried to transcribe this for you \*votw\* readers, but Gloria and her friends have such magnificent Noo Yawk voices that words on a page just can't do the conversation justice. You have to hear it for yourself.

On their first two albums, TMBG continued the phone theme without using Dial-A-Song for raw materials. "Absolutely Bill's Mood" opens with a longish acoustic guitar improvisation by noisemaster Eugene Chadbourne, recorded down the phone from his North Carolina home. "Ana Ng," their MTV and alternative-radio breakthrough hit, featured their friend Lisa Klapp reciting one line, "I don't want the world...I just want your half," from her phone at work.

Fifteen years later, TMBG's Dial-A-Song is still going strong (the number, once again, is (718) 387- 6962). It often features announcements from the band, and just prior to the release of their two most recent albums, 1994's JOHN HENRY and 1996's FACTORY SHOWROOM, Dial-A-Song featured the original demos of the new songs. Even though the band doesn't use the telephone as an integral part of their music any more, the number still appears in the liner notes of their albums and still looms large in their legend. I assume they've upgraded to a better machine now too.

The coolest telephone related book I own is the Signet paperback novel **PHONE CALL** by Jon Messmann, published in 1979. **PHONE CALL** was supposed to be made into a film but for some odd reason never reached the silver screen. The cover of Phone Call states "Terror has your number!" and that this is "The spine-tingling, hair-raising thriller of the year!". The cover art shows a black phone receiver melting. Phone Call has a few scary passages as the "bad guy" takes his twisted revenge on those who've done him wrong. This bad guy turns out to be a none other than a Telephone Company employee (big surprise, I know) but I won't tell you just *what* he does that's so bad but it is fairly evil and involves telephone electronics mixed in with a dash of telepathy.

**THE OMEGA MAN** is a great 1970's post-apocalyptic film which mixes comedic touches (possibly unintentional) while also getting downright scary at points. It's a remake of the \*extremely\* creepy Vincent Price film *The Last Man On Earth* (screenplay by the great Richard Matheson). Mere minutes into *The Omega Man* our hero, CHARLETON HESTON, exits a cinema where he has just viewed *Woodstock*. He notes the sun is going down, a sign that soon the Zombie-Vampyres will come out to play. The loud peal of ringing phones commences and against his better judgement Heston lurches towards a phone booth before shouting "There is no phone ringing dammit!" and viola the sound stops. "It's almost dark, they'll be waking up soon." And with that Heston zips off to his bunker.

*Please operator, please give us a chance  
The people are waiting so please dial us this dance  
They want to hear our music yeah they want us to sing  
So operator please make their telephone ring  
Yeah yeah yeah....*

excerpt from SESAME STREET's "Telephone Rock"



TORI SPELLING

## '90210' STAR TORI IS AFRAID TO DIAL 411

Tori Spelling is 24 years old and makes \$50,000 for each episode of "Beverly Hills, 90210"—but she is still afraid of the bogeyman!

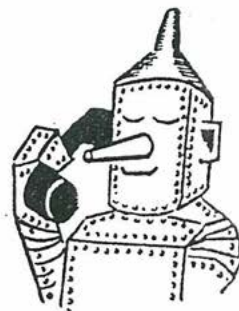
"I do have odd habits," she told Jay Leno. "I check under my bed every night for the bogeyman."

That's just a little thing, though." Tori admits she's also frightened by—the telephone!

"I'm scared to call information. I call and I panic. My voice gets really high and I get really nervous. And people say, 'Is your mommy there?'"

It is no secret **WHOPPIE GOLDBERG** has participated in some pretty bad projects. One standout of interest for us would be Whoppie's woefully depressing role in *THE TELEPHONE*. This is one awful film and if you think you may be renting it, you might want to stop reading this now—I will reveal the ending.

Did I say depressing? Right. The entire film takes place in a dingy wee apartment in LA. The character Whoppie plays is a struggling actress constantly on the phone throughout the film, arguing with women friends, video store staff, policemen and anyone else who will listen. She is very unhappy and becomes more unhinged as the film progresses. Aside from being a constant downer it's a tad disappointing to see Whoppie's character doing racist/stereotype impressions of the *Irish cop* the *Chinese restaurant employee* and so on—I mean c'mon. The screenplay sounded promising with writers HARRY NILSSON and TERRY SOUTHERN but that's not the case. This 90+ minute monologue quickly gets old. Just when you think Whoppie's character can't get more low the Phone Company Man comes to take away her headset. At this point we realize the phone hasn't been working throughout the whole film! Whoppie's character tussles with the Phone Company Man and he winds up dead on the floor. Roll credits.







Canadian Operators are just so friendly!